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Journalists Are Not Spies

Stansfield Turner, the Director of Central Intelligence, seems surprised to learn how the nation's news organizations feel about having journalists recruited for C.I.A. work. His vast information plant did not prepare him for the reaction of the American Society of Newspaper Editors when he told them he reserves the right to enlist journalists in secret missions.

Very simply, responsible editors most vigorously protest the director's policy as a threat to the safety of American correspondents, to their ability to function in dangerous parts of the world and to the integrity of their reports. We argue from the premise that free American inquiry around the world has a greater value than any occasional intelligence mission. The American press has a higher right than the Director's occasional convenience, the right to a guarantee that its calling will not be subverted by its own Government.

American reporters cannot long function abroad if forced to operate under a cloud of suspicion. They need to be what they represent themselves to be: independent seekers of information, which they communicate to the public. They may be suspected of national, political or personal bias, but they should never be plausibly suspected of also being C.I.A. operatives. For Admiral Turner to contend that some journalists are fair game for his pressing work is to suggest that any and all may be. That is a burden the press cannot bear.

We are not much impressed with the bureaucratic care with which Admiral Turner says he only rarely "waives" his own regulation against enlisting report-

ers, clergymen and academics. He told Congress recently that he had approved three such ventures under particularly urgent circumstances. It was left to his deputy to complete the report a few days later by testifying that none of these missions was actually undertaken. So much for the admiral's careful supervision.

Admiral Turner says it is naïve to think American news personnel are seen abroad as free of all intelligence contacts. But it is one thing for a journalist to interview intelligence agents abroad, quite another to carry out a United States spying chore. If foreigners are already suspicious, what are they to think when the No. 1 spy confirms their fear?

Admiral Turner implies that there is something unpatriotic in the journalist's refusal to contemplate aid to his country. On the contrary, there is no higher service for a free press than to operate openly and independently to inform all Americans, including the intelligence agencies. That, too, is serving the nation. As Justice Hugo Black once observed, the press is "one of the very agencies the Framers of our Constitution thoughtfully and deliberately selected to improve our society and keep it free." That worthy ideal cannot be pursued if the line between the American press and the American Government is so dangerously blurred.

The admiral may disagree, but his failure even to understand the issues involved is alarming. He can hardly have given adequate advice to President Carter, who is supporting his director. The President should think again.